

**Paths of Love: The Discernment of Vocation**  
**According to Aquinas, Ignatius, and Pope John Paul II**

Brief Summary

Joseph Bolin

There are two basic ways for a Christian to choose a path in life. He can begin by reflecting on his goal in life, and think about what will be most helpful in reaching that goal, or he can ask himself what God wants him to do with his life. These approaches are different and complementary, yet only rarely do vocational books take into account these two fundamentally different approaches. This book aims to examine these two basic approaches to the question of vocation, the advantages and the potential dangers of each approach, and to propose a simple look at vocations which seeks to preserve the benefits of each approach. Unlike most other books on vocations, it is neither a theological treatise directed to intellectuals, nor a vocational guidebook, consisting primarily of detailed practical advice on choosing one's vocation. Rather, this book seeks to give a deep, yet simple and accessible perspective on vocation, both to individuals discerning their vocation, and to spiritual directors who guide others in their vocation, so that on the basis of this solid foundation, they may be capable of forming good judgments in whatever particular situations they are dealing with.

Whatever approach we take to vocation, the focus of our attention must be love. Each and every vocation must be centered around love, because it is through love that we are united with God, who is love, and in whom all human life finds its fulfillment. Our life will therefore be more perfect, to the extent that our love is greater. The fundamental requirement for living in love is that we keep the commandments. As St. John says, "this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments." (1 John 5:3) In addition to the commandments, we are given the counsels, which are meant as helpful means for growing in love. But love itself must always remain the standard by which our choices are measured. The decisive factor in our vocation is our dedication to pursuing constant growth in love. The intensity and steadfastness of our resolve to pursue holiness using the means we choose, is of greater importance than the means that we choose. It is better, for example, to seek holiness in marriage wholeheartedly, than to seek holiness in religious life halfheartedly. Yet given an equal dedication on our part, we will grow in love more surely and rapidly if we live in a manner that is in itself more suited to growing in love, as for example, by living the life of the evangelical counsels.

When it comes to choosing the particular path in life that will be most conducive to love, St. Thomas' approach is to think about the objective goodness and possibility of the way of life in question. He says, for example, that it is unnecessary to think for a long time before deciding to enter religious life, because "it is certainly better," and "because those who enter religious life do not rely upon their own strength,"<sup>1</sup> but look to God for the strength needed to live it. To the objection that one must discern whether one's intention to enter religious life is from God, St. Thomas responds that if one's desire is sincere, then

---

<sup>1</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II 189:10

since it is for something good, it is certainly from God. It does not matter whether God is the immediate source of the movement, or employs instruments to draw someone to religious life. Even if the devil himself were the immediate source of this desire, the desire itself would be good, and would be ultimately from God.

St. Teresa of Avila in her own life acted according to these principles of St. Thomas. She saw what was better, and determined to do it. “Though I did not succeed to incline my will to being a nun, I saw that this was the best and safest state, and so, little by little, I determined to force myself to embrace it.”<sup>2</sup> She goes on to say how God rewards such “violence” (Cf. Mat 11:12) with oneself. “When I took the habit, the Lord soon made me understand how greatly he favors those who use force with themselves in serving him.”<sup>3</sup>

In contrast to St. Thomas, St. Ignatius of Loyola primarily sees the issue as “seeking and finding the Divine Will.” Ignatius gives three “times” in which one may choose a state of life in accordance with the divine will: (1) When one has an immediate experience about which there can be no doubt as to its divine source, and which directs one to a state of life; (2) when by much experience and discernment of the working of the Holy Spirit, one perceives that the Spirit by its movement is inviting or drawing one to a state of life, or that the desire for a state of life originates from the Holy Spirit; (3) when, beginning from an attitude of detachment to all created goods, and if possible, with a preference for what in general conforms more to God’s will, one makes a prudent choice of a state of life as a means of serving God and saving one’s soul.

Each of these approaches has its own advantages and its own dangers. St. Thomas’ approach has the advantage of being more objective, and therefore less liable to deception, but also has the risk of being too abstract, and therefore too removed from one’s concrete and living relationship with God; St. Ignatius’ approach has the advantage of being more personal, but also carries the risk that a vocation will be seen as an obligatory burden imposed by God, rather than a free invitation to greater love. St. Alphonsus de Ligouri and Von Balthasar seem to make this mistake, due to overemphasizing the individual character of a vocation.

But though the two approaches have fundamental differences, they are ultimately compatible. On the one hand, it is “objectively” better to follow God’s will than our own. On the other hand, granting that we are seeking God’s will, we should recognize that there exist not only special, but also general, objective indicators of God’s will. Thus St. Alphonsus, who adopts the general approach of St. Ignatius, does not see special signs of God’s will as being required for the one who desires to embrace religious life; he requires just two signs, which correspond to what St. Thomas requires: a good and firm intention, and the lack of impediments.

If we take the condition that one be free from impediments, and formulate it positively—one must be suited for the way of life—then we have the primary conditions that the Church requires for a vocation. The first of these two elements, the firm will and intention to live a particular state of life (assuming that the choice is legitimate and good in itself), is so essential to a vocation, that St. Francis de Sales goes so far as to say that such a firm will *is* a vocation. For the confirmation of a vocation, however, we still need a third

---

2 St. Teresa of Avila, *Autobiography*, Ch. 3

3 *Ibid.*, Ch. 4

condition, namely acceptance or approval by the Church. God does not call us to holiness simply as individuals, but as members of the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ. And for this reason, it is the task of the Church to test and to ratify a vocation, especially a vocation to the consecrated life or the priesthood.

The approaches of St. Thomas and St. Ignatius are not only theoretically compatible, but are united to some extent in Pope John Paul II's outline of vocation. As the pope describes it, a vocation always begins with Christ, who comes in love to an individual person, leading him to search for a path in life by which to respond to that love. In prayerful dialog with Christ, this person then examines his personal circumstances, in order to find the path of life in which he can make the best gift of himself in love.

This combined approach is perhaps the best way to think about vocation. The final aim of our deliberation should be to make a response to God's eternal love for us. For this reason, prior to "discerning" our vocation, or "deciding" on a state of life, we must strive above all to purify our heart, to truly love and to seek God above all and in all things, and to carry this attitude of love into our choice of a state of life. Only then should we set about using the gifts God has given us—our mind and heart—to make a decision about a state of life.

In this discernment of a vocation, one or the other element—the mind or the heart—may play a predominant role. We may make a decision primarily with the mind: after thinking about and reflecting on all the relevant factors, we may see what the best means is for practicing love and growing in it, and so choose that means. Or we may make a decision primarily with the heart: among several alternatives that would each be a good path for practicing love and growing in it, we may choose the alternative to which we are more inclined—not according to a quickly passing inclination, but a deep or abiding inclination, that is, according to true love.

As we reflect and choose a way of life, we should always bear in mind that the path we choose is in the end not a path of our own invention, but is part of God's design; each of us is in a particular place in the world, so that we may choose a particular path to God. And so, after choosing a path for our life, we should gratefully give thanks to God for his love, and the opportunity and invitation to love him that he has offered to us.

A strong and firm intention ought to follow upon our choice; this strong intention will enable us to truly devote ourselves to the practice of love of God and neighbor in the way of life we choose, and to persevere in the face of the difficulties that arise. This firm intention for the service of God in a way of life usually produces an inner peace. And so the possession of peace in one's heart in regard to a particular choice is a confirming sign of one's vocation, and may even be called *the* sign of a vocation.

This intermediate approach is by no means the only sound approach to vocation. Between the way of proceeding presented by St. Thomas, and that presented by St. Ignatius, there are indeed many different ways that we may follow in making the choice of a way of life. What matters most is purifying our hearts, sincerely striving for an ever greater love, and while always being obedient to the teachings and precepts of the Church and observing Christian prudence, being at the same time open to the movements of the Holy Spirit, wherever he may lead us. Seeking and pursuing our vocation should be neither a mechanical nor an anxiety-filled procedure, but a living and joyful journey with God! "God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything." (1 John 3:20)